

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000889

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR PRM/AFR MARY LANGE

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SUBJECT: UNHCR VERIFIES REFUGEE POPULATION IN MALAWI

REF: A. 03 LILONGWE 887

1B. 03 LILONGWE 1241

Classified By: POLOFF KIERA EMMONS FOR REASONS 1.5 b & d

11. (C) SUMMARY. A UNHCR team from Geneva has assembled in Malawi to verify the number of refugees and asylum seekers in the two camps and in urban areas. Serious problems with the 2003 census and doubts about UNHCR Malawi's management of the refugee situation prompted World Food Program (WFP) to request Geneva's assistance in determining the actual population and number of food beneficiaries in Malawi. Though initially marred by technical difficulties, the exercise is being conducted in an efficient manner and is, thus far, reducing the possibility for fraud and misrepresentation in the camps. New, sophisticated refugee identification and ration cards are being distributed, and though a formal exit monitoring system is not yet in place, the new cards provide previously non-existent identification and accountability controls. END SUMMARY.

UNCLEAR POPULATION FIGURES

12. (C) During September 8 visit to Dzaleka refugee camp, WFP officials told poloff they requested a verification of the refugee and asylum seeker population directly from Geneva. WFP officials observed that the camp was essentially empty until food day, and asked UNHCR Malawi to provide updated population figures. UNHCR Malawi was unable to do so, and according to WFP, the resident UNHCR mission in Malawi was "unhelpful" and "resistant" to the idea of a verification exercise, so WFP "went around" the local office and straight to Geneva. (NOTE: Asylum seeker is defined as a person who has not been designated by the GOM as a refugee - the GOM has only one officer to adjudicate these cases and works with a substantial case backlog. END NOTE.) WFP has long suspected that poor management of the refugee caseload has contributed to misrepresentation and incorrect assessments of the population eligible to receive food assistance in the camps. Verification will also take place in Luwani camp and in urban areas, though refugees living outside of the camps are not entitled to WFP rations.

13. (C) The head of the UNHCR delegation from Geneva admitted that the 2003 census (reftel A) was badly flawed, and that the lack of a departure monitoring mechanism combined with the generic ration cards presented an easy opportunity for fraud. WFP officials have repeatedly told poloff they have serious concerns with UNHCR's management of the camp population. Incidences of Malawians posing as refugees or refugees using the ration cards of dead or long-departed refugees are, according to WFP, very common. UNHCR population figures continually disagreed with WFP figures, and even after the 2003 census, UNHCR maintained there were many more refugees than were counted (reftel B).

TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

14. (C) The UNHCR team arrived in Malawi on August 23 with the goal of verifying 100 families each day. As of September 8, fewer than 200 families had been verified, though the daily figures have steadily risen. The first two weeks of the exercise were lost to computer and equipment problems. WFP's position is that these problems could have been easily prevented with prior communication and adequate preparation on the part of UNHCR Malawi, whom they felt was behaving in an "obstructionist" manner. The UNHCR official from Geneva agreed that preparation was inadequate.

15. (U) The verification process is complex and heavily dependent on technology. Much of the process is based on a May 2004 exercise carried out by an NGO to identify and assign street addresses to each home in the camp. Each individual or family must come to the verification center with all of his/her identification documents, ration card, and street address. The existing ration card database is cross-checked against the residential database, and family size is physically verified. All of this information is then entered into a new database.

16. (U) New refugee/asylum seeker identification cards are printed after the legitimacy of each claim to such status, identity, and family size are verified. The cards include a digital photo of the bearer, the ration card number, and a case number, and are laminated with a UNHCR holographic logo. To receive food rations, an adult member of the family must present the ration card and his/her photo ID. A "food list" will be maintained to document who has received rations each month, and after three consecutive no-shows, the refugee will be presumed to have departed the camp and all benefits will be suspended. The database will then be updated accordingly.

COMMENT

17. (C) The verification exercise is long overdue. The admittedly flawed census and UNHCR Malawi's unsubstantiated claims of a higher population have been a source of controversy and concern for us and, apparently, for WFP. Though not entirely infallible, the new ID cards and management system will provide better data and reduce opportunities for misrepresentation. Because the authority for printing both the ID cards and the ration cards will ultimately rest with UNHCR Malawi, further uncertainties are not out of the question. WFP's obvious distrust of UNHCR Malawi corroborates our suspicions of poor local leadership and further emphasizes the need for continued oversight of the Malawi portfolio. Along with WFP, we will be on the lookout for a significant change in population demographics or in the number of daily verifications performed after the departure of the UNHCR team.

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